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THIS SPRING

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offer a multitude of blooms—  
and they are perennial



This container plays with diverse leaf shapes: spiky Phormium 'Sundowner', lacy 'Purple Peacock' kale, tiny Lonicera nitida 'Twiggy' and broad-leaved Heuchera 'Delta Dawn'. Warm colors unite the planting.

# CONTAINER

# Crazy

Tips for combining and caring for plants in large pots

words and photographs by **Dan Heims** /  
**Terra Nova Nurseries**

**I** GET NO THRILL from champagne—I get mine from a perfect planting combination in a container. What is it that makes me drop to my knees? Artistry. I have been to a thousand gardens and a thousand more nurseries and garden centers, and it's this amazing allure that magnetizes my attention. Can it be described? Sure. In fact, I have created a pseudo-mathematical formula that can help anyone turn a blasé container into a stunning container.

The formula is  $1+1=?$ . The “ones” in this case are flower color, foliage color, texture, motion, architectural form, seasonality and even fragrance. If a combination has two plants of fine texture and similar color, the result could be a disappointing  $1+1=1$ . Without contrast, there's no value added. A good designer or horticulturist knows the value of contrasting colors and textures. They will understand the character of the plants involved and foresee what the container will look like a few months from planting, when it reaches all of its glory.

If all notes click into the perfect melody, 1 plus 1 could equal 14. Garden writer Sydney Eddison once pulled the colors from works of famous artists like Rousseau and Van Gogh and transformed her containers and garden using plants that flowered in the same palette. It blew my mind! You do get a hint of the artist's genius by a bit of liberal extrapolation.

My mother always combined red geraniums, 'Crystal Palace' blue lobelia and white petunias. In

this patriotic combo, the fine texture and dark foliage color of the lobelia contrasted perfectly with the bold geraniums and blowsy petunias, which also offered contrast with their blooms. In my containers, I might blend *Heuchera* 'Sugar Berry', with its deep, bold purple-metallic leaves, with animated *Hakonechloa macra* 'All-Gold'. A bronzy *Ajuga reptans* 'Black Scallop' cascades over the edge of the pot. *Choisya ternata* 'Sundance' forms the “exclamation point” in the container. What results is a symphony of contrasting colors, textures, flowering times, fragrance, motion and interest.

Aside from looking good together, plants in one container must share the same growing requirements. Sometimes you have no choice for placing your pots, though most plants would love four hours of morning sun and protection from the heat of the day. Common sense is in play. If leaves look scalded or burnished, shield them. Too little light will bring on stretching of the stems and poor flowering. Knowing your plants and their needs is a biggie. If you aren't confident, do ask a knowledgeable person at the nursery. They can help you put together a “like-minded” combination.

Beware of plant thugs like sweet potato vine. They will overwhelm and suffocate their pot-mates. Thankfully, less vigorous and lacier forms are available now. Look for plants like heuchera that play well with others. I have had heuchera in the same container for five years, removing old leaves



Clockwise from bottom right:

*Heucherella* 'Sweet Tea', grassy *Uncinia rubra* 'Belinda's Find' and tricolor violets skirt spiky *Cordyline australis* 'Red Star' and lacy *Nandina domestica* 'Tuscan Flame'.

Upright *Leucothoe axillaris* 'Curly Red' is surrounded by (left to right) *Deschampsia flexuosa* 'Tatra Gold', *Lysimachia congestiflora* 'Persian Chocolate', *Heuchera* 'Pinot Noir' and *Selaginella kraussiana*.

With its dark green leaves and red stems, *Drimys lanceolata* combines well with *Heuchera* 'Mahogany', green-and-gold *Osmanthus heterophyllus* 'Goshiki' and red-and-green *Phormium* 'Sundowner'.

This hanging basket holds *Heucherella* 'Stoplight', *Heuchera* 'Lime Rickey' and 'Peach Flambe', *Corydalis* 'Canary Feathers', *Carex siderostica* 'Lemon Zest' and *Begonia* 'Fireworks'.

The black blades of *Ophiopogon japonicus* 'Nigrescens' and thin stems of *Corokia cotoneaster* echo the dark leaf veining on *Heuchera* 'Shanghai', while 'Doone Valley' thyme and tricolor violets offer some green contrast.

A blooming *Daphne transatlantica* 'Summer Ice' is ringed by (counter-clockwise from top) *Tsuga canadensis* 'Gentsch White', *Leucothoe axillaris* 'Scarletta', *Hedera helix* 'Fantasia', *Heuchera* 'Mahogany' and *Carex brunnera* 'Variegated'.

All photographs were taken at Swansons Nursery, Wells Medina Nursery and Furney's Nursery in Seattle, Wash.





and flower stalks in the spring and refreshing the fertilizer at that time. If long necks are seen on perennials, they can be chopped off in the spring and rerooted right in the same pot for a fuller look.

As seasons change, so will the palette of plants. Spring-flowering bulbs (planted in early fall) and evergreens will take the planter from winter to spring. Annuals and a growing number of appropriate perennials work the pots from late spring to fall. Look to Pinterest.com for some awesome combos. Tired annuals can be pulled in September and be replaced with fall-interest plants. Look to new forms of heuchera for great, evergreen autumnal color. For winter, a color-depleted container can be filled with evergreen and berried branches.

Once you determine the most exciting combo, your challenge is fitting it into the perfect pot that suits its location. I'm here to help.

## CONTAINERS AND CARE

The beauty of a container is that its contents can be changed readily, it fits on a balcony and it can be moved. I suggest spending the money on the largest container you can find that will still remain in proportion to its surroundings. A lot of root competition will happen within a pot that holds a mixed planting. Where there's more room for the roots, plants don't stress out. They're therefore more resistant to attacks from pests and diseases. You can, of course, plant in anything, but big, stoneware pots will give you happier plants. Look for the term "freeze-proof" on the pot; you'll save money in the long run.

Be sure to consider the container as part of the design package. Does it mirror the height of the plants? Does the glaze work with or against the palette of flower and foliage colors? These are things to think about.

Invariably, as you get more into container gardening, you'll end up with different size containers with different size plants with different size water

needs. Listen to your plants, as they will tell you when they are not happy. I prefer to dry my pots out somewhat, but not entirely. Drip irrigation is a dream for containers; just add more emitters for larger pots. I have 24 containers on a single computer-controlled system.

If your plants get too much water or too little water, the results are the same; root hairs, which bring in water and minerals, die and the plants wilt until they regenerate. Soil texture is key to proper watering. Most soil blends I've seen have particles that are too small. Horticulturists know that air is as important as moisture to the roots. For this reason, I choose a mix that drains readily and has large particles of pumice, bark or perlite. Bark is important as it hosts beneficial fungi (mycorrhizae) that help the plant fend off nasty pathogens. Do a water test on your soil in the container. Moisten it entirely and then water it again. If water puddles and sits, you're in trouble. It needs to move and drain out the bottom.

I mentioned competition. This is not only for water and light, but for food as well. I use what is called a micro-prill time-released formula fertilizer. If you've wondered what those green "beads" are on top of your nursery containers, it's probably Apex fertilizer in a 14-14-14 NPK formulation that will last up to four months in a container. These are available on the retail market under the trade name of Osmocote. It is important to get the fertilizer not only on top of the soil but throughout the mix. This will give a consistent feeding throughout the growing season.

Containers have been around since Babylonian times. By choosing the right pot, soil, fertilizer and plants, you'll have a terrific accent to your home that will change with the seasons and be a focal point for all who visit. Garden on!

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**DAN HEIMS** is the president of Terra Nova Nurseries (terravanurseries.com), which introduces notable new perennials every year. Since 1973, Dan has been involved in all facets of horticulture, from teaching and writing to designing and building to exploration and discovery.